

Tech-industry perks long associated with Bay Area being replicated across LA

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How does an old-fashioned print-era company - formerly known as the Yellow Pages - attract top talent to its offices as it tries to remake itself as an online local search company? For those who live in hip parts LA, the company now called YP has an answer it borrowed from Silicon Valley: the luxury bus.

Big Bay Area companies are well-known for busing workers from San Francisco to Silicon Valley. Now YP is shuttling workers to Glendale, Calif., on the same kind of fancy buses that Google uses, fitted out with expensive, tush- and back-friendly seats, and Wi-Fi connections.

Perks long associated with the Bay Area are being replicated across Los Angeles as the burgeoning startup tech scene drives up demand for programmers, engineers and other tech-skilled workers. YP reached out to San Francisco startup RidePal to bring the shuttle south because the competition for technologists in Los Angeles has become "more fierce" in the last two years than any stretch during the last two decades, said Darren Clark, YP's chief technology officer.

Until recently, workers seeking stock options that could transform them from students to millionaires in a couple of years would have had to look in the Bay Area. But the early success of startups such as Snapchat, Tinder and Whisper and better development programs at Los Angeles universities are turning Los Angeles into a counter-option, said Matt Mickiewicz, chief executive of jobs search engine Hired.com.

"As the LA tech scene continues to rise, there's obviously best practices from the Valley that will be transported down here," said Greg Bettinelli, a partner at Upfront Ventures, the most active venture capital firm in Los Angeles. "I don't think it's unique to the tech industry, but it's a broader realization of the tighter labor market for highly skilled workers and the need to create better team cohesiveness."

Appmakers Whisper and Scopely offer employees unlimited vacations. Demand Media reimburses up to \$1,000 for vacation spending, and TrueCar gives workers \$50 monthly to spend on "fitness." People-search engine Spokeo takes trips to Dodgers, Clippers and Kings games, and more recently Disneyland. Online food-ordering service ChowNow provides fresh fruit, ChowNow bucks for use at client restaurants - and boxing classes.

As a decades-old company, YP isn't the sexiest option for workers who might be weighing three or four contracts. The company increased recruiting efforts this year, taking special aim at the expanding legion of programmers and engineers working at startups on Los Angeles' Westside. The daunting highway time to Glendale scared off recruits and sapped retention rates. About half of the 500 staffers in Glendale reported commutes of more than 45 minutes one way.

On the YP bus on a recent Tuesday morning, Troy Devers tapped away on his phone, scheduling meetings for later in the day. Until the service launched last month, he'd be anxious about missing important emails as he directed his BMW over the course of an hour.

"The concern about the commute is just a constant conversation in the office," he said. "Having this dedicated luxury bus provides a lot of peace of mind."

Devers, senior manager of consumer product marketing, estimated that

he has saved \$200 with the bus. YP pays the fare, about \$10 a ride before discounts, in lieu of a parking subsidy.

So far, the luxo-buses have operated with none of the drama that erupted in San Francisco. Last year activists there attacked the idea of "Google buses" and similar buses provided by Facebook and Genentech as maleficent symbols of the gentrification pumping up housing prices and forcing many longtime residents from their homes. San Francisco officials eventually began to charge companies for using public curbs as a loading zone. Google runs a similar service in Los Angeles.

Clark expects little uproar at the three YP bus stops. Though expensive, housing prices aren't at insanity levels in Los Angeles, and RidePal is using public park-and-rides as pickup and drop-off locations. Nor does Los Angeles culture share the same level of everyday dissent common in San Francisco.

The bus stops at each pickup location once in the morning and arrives in Glendale at 9 a.m., and departs once at 5 p.m. It has the backing of Go Glendale, a nonprofit organization aimed at forging public-private partnerships around transportation issues. The bus holds up to 40 people, and independent travelers are welcome, RidePal and YP said.

"The more we create options to make transportation not a factor is good for the technology ecosystem here," Clark said.

After serving more than 100,000 rides in the Bay Area, RidePal is now ironing out deals with several technology, entertainment and biotechnology firms to bring more routes to Los Angeles, spokesman Bob Martin said.

"The recruiting and retention challenges are just as significant (in LA as in the Bay Area), and the pains of the drive-alone auto commute are

more significant, so word definitely gets around among the savvy tech HR folks when a solution like RidePal presents itself," he said.

Zach James, cofounder and co-chief executive of video technology startup Zefr, would rather see his employees live close to the company's office. They receive a bonus if they bicycle to work.

"We try really hard to attract people to the Venice/Santa Monica lifestyle," he said, noting they have in-office surfboards and groups that surf each morning or play Ultimate Frisbee on Wednesday nights.

But James has found people who want to live where options are more plentiful and ownership costs cheaper.

"I've told the engineers that if five of them all end up in the same city - Valencia, Arcadia, whatever - I'll get them a bus," James said.

In the meantime, if they don't want to commute a night here or there, employees can stay free of charge at two apartments Zefr has leased.

At advertising technology provider OpenX, President John Gentry said benefits at his company, such as a masseuse, are important though are peripheral.

"People love to talk about all the perks, but what really brings in the best people is the fundamentals: Is this a company that's going to grow? Where am I going to fit in?" he said. "That's the core of how we want to attract people."

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